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Liberated from learning?

When, last fall, the lads and ladies at Brown petitioned the university to stock the medicine chests with cyanide pills so that America's brightest and best could slip away painlessly in the event of nuclear attack, Establishment ears perked up. Maybe there was hope after all. Maybe it wasn't true that youth was subsiding into conservatism — or "materialism," as they say over lunch at Tiberio's.

Such doubts could be sustained at Brown certainly. Nobody proposed, for example, stocking grenades so that the young bloods, watching the Red Army wade ashore, could choose between suicide and resistance. Nor have campus protests died out since that business with the cyanide.

Last November, Brown students disrupted the campus again, barging into a career-counseling session and threatening to arrest CIA recruiters for — well, the exact charge was murky, but it had to do with alleged crimes in Central America. A wirephoto showed one of the Brown boobies with a sign reading, "CIA Out

Of . . ." In the picture I saw the end of the slogan was illegible, but who does not know the rest by heart?

Brown's demonstrators get prickly at the suggestion that they are back numbers, '60s generation activists propelled into the modern world through some curious time warp.

"People use that nostalgia line to discredit anything that goes against the status quo," says Juliet M. Brodie, who was among the heavy-breathers trying to collar the CIA men. "This was not just a protest," she snaps. "It was a citizen's arrest."

What is really arresting about the Brown protests is the lack of initia-

tors. CIA recruiters are everywhere on the college scene — and, except at Brown, everywhere let alone.

College kids have been inconspicuous even in that *cause du jour*, anti-apartheid. The sidewalks in front of Washington's South African

Embassy are populated mostly by grownups — aged, fading flower children, and congressmen seeking martyrdom on the cheap. (The cops haul them away, but then turn them loose and expunge the record.)

What turns these Brownies on, do you suppose? According to an interview in *The New York Times*, Ms. Brodie thinks her views may have been shaped by her mother's involvement in peace demonstrations. Sandor Katz, another CIA-basher, recalls his parents toting him along to demonstrations when he was a small child.

But Jason Salzman, who helped organize the cyanide drive, may come closer to the truth. He cites Brown's progressive curriculum, which, it says here, "allows students unusual freedom to design their own programs."

"I came to this school because of the curriculum," says young Mr. Salzman. "The curriculum attracts people who might be interested in taking responsibility for their own education, so they are taking responsibility for much larger things."

Hmmm. A more likely result of lowered academic standards, of a diminished insistence on intellectual rigor, is to free students to pursue bizarre extracurricular goals — suicide planning and Lord-knows-what. When they are liberated from Euclid and Chaucer, politically "aware" students have lots of time to fret about "The Day After."

Once a tough school stressing conventional studies, Brown succumbed to the '60s Zeitgeist after months of student agitation for curriculum "reforms." Other schools

also capitulated, but what distinguishes Brown is that, alone among Ivy League universities, it has preserved these changes into the '80s, enshrining a once-modish program of studies.

The Brown freshman, who formerly spent his first college year sampling the liberal arts, now goes to "modes of thought" seminars. In preparing for graduation, he may

spurn the humdrum to pursue an "individualized major." The byword at Brown is "flexibility." Marching still to a bygone beat, Brown encourages its students to do their own thing.

"The almost complete freedom offered by the innovative curriculum," gushes the *Comparative Guide to American Colleges*, "has been maintained despite the pressures attendant on admission to graduate school" — though outside pressures did force Brown's progressives to relent on grades.

Other universities' graduate schools were curious about, for example, academic performance.

and this was tough to assess empirically in the absence of grades. It also was tough to assess when students, instead of following an established curriculum, were permitted "the almost complete freedom" offered by Brown's "innovative curriculum."

Finding its graduates regarded elsewhere with suspicion, Brown was obliged to bend. It clings to the quaint '60s curriculum and still permits the pass/fail option in all courses. But Brown students headed for graduate school on other campuses can, if they wish, get letter grades.

It is unclear whether they may major in Activism as well, but Brown students are known to be studying the subject. Some of those who organized the CIA protest said that, unlike Vietnam-era students who were intuitively against war, the Brown protestors had prepared themselves through "research."

It is little short of miraculous, when you think about it, the things a bright young fellow can pick up at a good school.

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